Discourse, Representation and Urban Planning: how a critical approach to discourse helps reveal the spatial re-ordering of street sex work[1]

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ABSTRACT   *This paper shows how a critical approach to discourse sheds light on processes of spatial re-orderings. It uses a case study of urban planning in an area of street sex work to explore the ways in which various representations of prostitution can be used to inform planning decisions. Representations of sex worker identity also expose complex spatial and social geographies and evolving processes of marginalisation and exclusion.*

KEY WORDS   *Urban planning; representation; discourse analysis; street sex work; prostitution; exclusion*

Introduction

A critical approach to discourse regards meanings and identities as constructed within political agendas, which are themselves established out of the history, tradition, attitudes and beliefs of groups and individuals (Howlett & Ramesh 1995). The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the methods favoured by cultural geographers, in particular discourse analysis and a focus on representation, help shed light on the processes involved in social and spatial marginalisation. Specifically, the paper draws on my PhD case study of planning in an area of street sex work to illustrate how a critical approach to discourse can be used to understand re-orderings of urban space and processes of social exclusion.

A critical approach to discourse

A critical approach to discourse helps to show how influential discourses are in the re-orderings of urban space. The concern of this paper is to understand the *productivity* of discourse, i.e. the capacity to bring into being what is talked about. Such an analysis applies a Foucauldian approach to discourse where discourses are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak … discourses are not about objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention' (Jones *et al.* 1998, p. 166; see Foucault 1991). A critical approach to discourse acknowledges that problems come into discourse and therefore into existence as reinforcements of ideologies. For example, discourses signify who is virtuous and useful and who is dangerous and inadequate, which actions will be rewarded and which penalised. They constitute people as subjects with particular kinds of aspirations, self-conceptions and

fears, and they create beliefs about the relative importance of events and objects (Edelmen 1998, pp. 12–13). Such an approach to discourse seeks to understand the capacity of broader social and political powers to define appropriate or inappropriate matters for institutional debate and to sanctify the speech of some as the language of the 'public' (Benhabib 1992).

A critical approach to discourse helps shed light on social problems, including their causes and spatial manifestation. As an analytical approach it draws together the 'immaterial cultural processes' and their 'more material … bump-into-able' outcomes (Philo 2000, pp. 33–5). When applied to a study of planning in the spaces of street sex work, a critical approach to discourse provides valuable insight into many of the 'everyday social practices' that 'underpin … [the] … social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion' (Philo 2000, p. 33). In the case of St Kilda, discussed here, such exclusionary discourses had quite material, physical impacts.

Changing representations of street sex work: a perennial part of a local culture or a defiled activity that needs to be removed

St Kilda, Melbourne, has a long history as an area of street sex work. In the 1980s a State-wide advocacy service for workers in the prostitution industry—the Prostitutes Collective of Victoria (PCV)—was established in St Kilda. Yet the relationship between street sex work and the place identity of St Kilda has been a contested one. In the 1980s, for example, a resident action group named Westaction, supported by the then Mayor of the City of St Kilda, pledged to move sex workers out of the suburb. According to the members of Westaction interviewed by Daniels, the central claim of this campaign was that '… "the residents of St Kilda are under siege" from prostitutes, pimps, drug addicts and customers cruising the area in search of sex' (Daniels 1984, p. 341). These discourses about street sex work in the 1980s drew a negative link between street sex work and the place identity of St Kilda, claiming that the victims of prostitution were 'those people whose home values have eroded and whose addresses have become a dirty joke' (Daniels 1984, p. 341). According to Daniels, this campaign aimed to promote 'a whole new image of the suburb' by 'removing from the streets of St Kilda the defiled bodies of not only prostitutes, but also the poor, the unemployed, drug users and homosexuals' (Daniels 1984, p. 342).

Different discourses about street sex work in St Kilda were evident in local government planning records in the 1990s. In the early 1990s, for example, local planners were involved in a series of community forums designed to discuss the issue of street sex work. These forums recognised that street sex work had a long-term association with St Kilda and attempted to reconcile its role as part of the culture of the area with the needs of residents (PCV 1997, p. 5). The forums rejected the use of traffic management to control street sex work, defining prostitution as a 'social problem' not an 'engineering problem' and suggesting that 'hoons and their macho behaviour are the problem, not workers and their legitimate clients' (PCV 1997, p. 6). These forums informed the decision of the local government to support the decriminalisation of street sex work in Victoria.[2]

Discourses about street sex work as a long-term, and ongoing, activity in St Kilda were evident in other local government planning records in the 1990s. The local strategic planning committee, for example, acknowledged that 'street sex work in St Kilda has been occurring since early European settlement' (City of Port Phillip (CoPP) 1997, p. 2). This recognition of street sex work as a perennial part of St Kilda informed

local planning practices. The strategic planning committee, for example, noted that the 'legalisation of brothels and their regulation through the Prostitution Control Act (1994) does not appear to have reduced street sex work activity' (CoPP 1997, p. 2).

The ebb and flow of these two discourses about street sex work in St Kilda continued through more recent media. Popular media images, for example, promote St Kilda as an area that is rich in social diversity, a 'cosmopolitan party precinct', a 'City that Never Sleeps … a 24hour a day seven day a week zone of fun and food' (*Port Phillip Leader* 1997, p. 1). Yet such representations mask a range of social tensions in the suburb, tensions that come to the fore through recent and rapid gentrification. Some international firms, for example, have been quoted as saying that 'companies should avoid the area because of rising drug and crime problems' (*Port Phillip Leader* 1997, p. 1). Unlike the popular image of St Kilda as a party precinct, these images reflect a fear of 'threatening' social activities and a desire to remain removed from the 'defiled' spaces they inhabit (Sibley 1996; Creswell 1996). At the time of my PhD research, then, popular media also reflected the two dominant and competing discourses about street sex work in St Kilda.

Applying a critical approach to discourse to urban planning in the spaces of street sex work

An opportunity to investigate the meaning and representation of street sex work in St Kilda arose in the late 1990s when the City of Port Phillip, the local government municipality in which St Kilda is located, proposed to redevelop a municipal depot site into a medium-density housing development. This site was bordered on one side by Inkerman Street where the offices of the PCV are located, and on the other side by Greeves Street, the primary street in St Kilda that is used by women street sex workers. The redevelopment proposal provided a specific case study of the various ways in which street sex work was represented in local discourses and, in turn, how these discourses impacted upon local planning decisions and their material outcomes. Three specific sources of discourse were analysed as part of the study. They were: local government policies related to street prostitution; local government documents related to the proposed redevelopment;[3] and in-depth interviews with local government officers, residents, and street sex workers.[4]

Selection of interview respondents was based on a snowballing approach whereby one respondent would recommend another person most likely to shed light on the meaning or cause of the issue under discussion. For example, local government officers led me to residents who had contacted the council either with support or opposition to the existence of street sex work in the area. Such recommendations allowed me to analyse the ways in which various discourses about street sex work were employed by residents and used, or not, to influence planning decisions. My selection of interviewees from the prostitution industry was through the peak organisation of the PCV. I sent an initial outline of my research to the PCV and met with the coordinator to discuss the purpose of the research. PCV workers then volunteered to participate in interviews and sought approval from other sex workers for me to contact them at home to arrange interview times.

All interviews, those with government officers, residents, designers and sex workers, used semi-structured interview schedules. This method allowed me to treat the interviews as a conversation about the proposed redevelopment and its potential impact on the area. The schedule included prompts about the current nature of sex work activity

and the level of awareness and participation of the interviewee in local planning decisions, including the depot site redevelopment. The informality of the interview allowed me to develop a level of rapport with the respondent that led them to assume I supported their views. While I have at times felt uncomfortable about the assumed support I offered throughout the interviews, I am reconciled by the fact that the interview format produced diverse representations of street sex work and rich insights into the ways in which actors operated to have their particular discourses adopted in planning decisions. A critical approach to discourse enabled me to analyse the links between the various representations of street sex work evident in both planning documents and interview transcripts, and the ways in which these representations were reproduced within local planning decisions.

How in-depth interviews help shed light on the re-ordering of street sex work

The challenge of the Greeves Street case study was to understand how the various discourses outlined above operated at the time of the case study and whether one of these discourses had more currency in current planning decisions than the other. A focus on representation in the interviews allowed me to better understand how actors 'placed' themselves in St Kilda, both socially and spatially, and how they were also 'placed' by others.

In-depth interviews with street sex workers, for example, provided valuable insights into the link between street sex worker identity and the place identity of St Kilda. For sex workers, street prostitution was synonymous with St Kilda and a specific geography of the area was determined by street prostitution:

> there's men and women and trannies and … they tend to use their own areas … Greeves Street's a girl's area … The boys currently … [use] … Shakespeare Grove … and the Trannies [are] down by Safeways [super-market]. (D3:42b)

This explanation of the social geography of street prostitution helped explain the way St Kilda functioned for both sex workers and their clients. Within this spatial network of street sex work, the site of the case study—Greeves Street—was represented as a particular place that was 'known'. According to one sex worker, Greeves Street:

> marks a territory of street sex … It is known amongst the clients of street prostitution as a specific site of sex work within St Kilda. Some boys might be saying 'Oh go down to St Kilda', but also 'Go down to Greeves Street' … Rather than 'oh go down to Barkly Street and cruise around'. They know Greeves Street. (D3:43a)

Greeves Street, then, had a particular identity as an area of sex work and was known for this identity beyond the borders of St Kilda. The representation of St Kilda as an area that worked for street sex work drew not only on the mental maps of clients and sex workers but also related to the existing urban form, including the pattern of streets and building locations. Greeves Street, for example, was defined by one street sex worker as a useful place for street prostitution because of its location between two main roads and the fact that it was: 'sort of tucked away … a bit more discreet … so you sort of know that people who sort of make that little detour are likely to be potential clients, or considering to be clients' (D3:50a). A one-way traffic system introduced into Greeves Street in response to street sex work in the 1980s was also seen by this sex

worker as a design that reinforced the amenity of the street for sex work: 'it's the one-way I think that helps … It's like a shopping trolley thing … in terms of watching for cops, that's handy too … if they come up the other way you're going to notice them … That's helpful' (D3:50A). The discourse about street sex work as a perennial activity that forms part of the culture of the place is evident in the above quotations. For this street sex worker, street prostitution was a known and expected activity in the area.

Discourses about the everyday social practice of street prostitution produced by sex workers expanded on the notion of street sex work as a perennial part of the local culture by providing insights into the structural and systemic causes of street prostitution. In this way, the discourses produced by street sex workers did not fall into the risk of romanticising the role of street prostitution in local culture. Instead, they explained street sex work as a marginalised and extremely disadvantaged social activity. Sex workers were able to detail, for example, some of the causes of street prostitution:

> They're not working for the fun of it, they're working 'cause they have to. They need the money, right? They're not able to work … in brothels or the formal part of the industry … because the '94–'95 Act made it illegal … brothel owners and managers can lose their licence if they're found to have drugs or drug users on the premises. (D3:44)

Such explanations expanded on the discourse about street prostitution found in planning records in the 1990s. Sex workers provided insights into the social structure of the prostitution industry itself, revealing processes of exclusion and marginalisation and revealing the increasing vulnerability of younger street sex workers:

> The type of women who are working varies … you might have workers who've been around for years, who might have done a bit of time in brothels … might have worked interstate … but then you have different groups … younger groups who are also (drug) users … Now … the older more established type … they're more likely to be sort of clued in, been around for a while, all sorts of contacts … unfortunately those networks have broken down to a large degree … so those newer younger users don't have the same sort of introduction to safe using, and the support systems that were previously around. So there might be groups coming, street kids … homeless, hanging out in the city … coming to St Kilda to work. (D3:44/45)

Again, the complexity of street sex work as a perennial activity is revealed in detail here. This discourse differentiates street prostitution not only spatially but also temporally, drawing connections between different generations of sex workers and differing degrees of social marginalisation, in this case related to drug use and decaying social networks.

A critical approach to discourse also helped to reveal the complex reality of street sex worker identity. One sex worker challenged the dominant stereotype of sex worker identity by defining herself through mainstream feminine roles:

> A lot of brothel workers work on the street and the girls that work on the street, they're not all drug addicts. I mean I'm a 40 year old mother, I've got two children. I work, I go home, I pick up my daughter from school, I go home and cook a hot meal. (D9:133)

Such complex personal identities were played out spatially in St Kilda. This worker, for example, defined certain locations where she would not work because of the threat of being seen by people she knew in her role as mother:

> I won't work on St Kilda road because, well while I'm proud of what I do, I'm not ashamed of working on the street, but one of my daughter's friends and their Mum might drive by and well, I just wouldn't want that. (D9:130)

This worker was obviously aware of the diverse views of street sex work and the dominant discourse about defiled and threatening activities. She challenged such discourses through her depiction of the everyday social practice of street prostitution, including her relationship with local residents:

> Most of the residents say hello to you, I nick into their front gardens and brush my teeth. I know a few of those residents down there (Greeves Street area). (D9:133)

Rather than enacting a defiled activity that residents sought to remove, this sex worker portrayed her local social relations as supportive. Such discourses about the complexity of street prostitution deepen current understanding of street sex work as a perennial activity and the reasons for its location in St Kilda.

Instead of contributing to the complex understanding of the everyday practice of street sex work, residents who opposed sex work in the area drew on the discourse of prostitution as a defiled and threatening activity. One resident, in particular, challenged the representation of street sex work as a perennial activity and instead depicted street prostitution as creating chaos in her area. Her depiction of a defiled and threatening activity drew on standard planning measures such as traffic levels and defined social behaviours in ways that set them outside normal social relations. She defined street prostitution traffic, for example, as:

> faster than usual, wheelies, screeching of tyres, engines performance tests [laughter]. You know, it's unbelievable. It's like a farm yard. It's like all the roosters are strutting around and all the hens are in a flutter and everyone's showing off. It is unbelievable. (D10:142a)

The sense of disbelief and bemusement portrayed by this resident reinforced her representation of street sex work as disturbing behaviour related to the 'other'. She used a range of discursive strategies to influence local planning debates about street sex work and to challenge planning decisions that tolerated prostitution in her area. In particular, she employed the notion of 'normal' street life to support her representation of her area as problematic. Like the Westaction campaigns of the 1980s, such discourses equated street prostitution with defiled activities that were 'out of place':

> 98% of people in the metropolitan area have their street serving one function, to move their car to and from their house, to have a nature strip to plant a tree in, provide breathing space … But … because we live here, apparently we have to perform another function which is to pick up syringes, step over dogs' poo, have our lives at risk crossing the road, hear the screams, hear the gun shots, call the cops when they overdose on the street … This is the reality of a red light area. (D10:151a/b)

Perhaps the most effective discursive strategy used by this resident was to link her representation of street sex work and her area with the discourses attached to the redevelopment of the Greeves Street site. The Architecture and Urban Design brief for that redevelopment, for example, promoted discourses about ideal communities that had a 'human scale' and 'high quality architecture' and would 'engender a sense of

neighbourhood identity ... provid[ing] a positive interface with the surrounding area' (CoPP 1998, p. 6). Interviews with the local government officer who developed the brief revealed perceptions of street prostitution as out of place within that development. For him:

> if we have a nodal point for open space with, you know a whole lot of the functions that you like to see you know in the town centre, a rotunda, a letter box, telephone box, you know those sorts of things, maybe a community facility, we don't want it to become places for sex workers really to do business because no-one else will want to use those facilities. (D2:34a)

The new resident cited above joined forces with this discursive reconstruction of her area, arguing: 'I think the design is tremendous. It's state of the art ... it will help make the area safer, make people with dogs and cats and lives relate to the street again' (D10:150a). Through concerted efforts to have her views heard at planning forums and direct lobbying of local government officers, this resident successfully translated her views of the area into local policy and material outcomes. According to the Mayor at the time, traffic closures to reduce street sex work were introduced into Greeves Street in response to such resident pressures:

> Because Council is aware of the competing interests ... and the fact that residents in that area have got to an explosive point, we have taken that on board and we have taken a decision to trial some particular road closures in order to move the traffic, foot and car, out of the internal part of those blocks [Greeves Street and adjacent street] out onto the main streets to try and relieve the pressure on the residents. (O2:18c)

The decision to introduce gates to break the circulation of street sex traffic in Greeves Street is a material example of where discourses about normal social practices feed back into policy and planning decisions that marginalise and exclude certain social groups.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated the value of applying in-depth interviews in revealing the complexity of alternative discourses, rather than seek to reveal the 'truth'. It has also highlighted the importance of acting as an 'ally' whilst interviewing, helping prompt further insight into the meanings and causes of the issues explained. The paper has shown how a critical approach to discourse, with a focus on representation, can inform our understanding of social and spatial inequalities. The case study has shown how competing representations of street sex work can be used to validate the speech of some as the language of the public, to constitute certain subjects as defiled and dangerous, and to justify material developments, bump-into-able matters, that further exclude marginal social groups.

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NOTES

[2]   In St Kilda, local government support for the decriminalisation of street prostitution has been most evident in recent attempts to introduce 'tolerance' zones for legalised street sex work. This move has been restricted by both State and local opposition and by the fact that most of St Kilda has been rezoned as 'residential'. Tolerance zones were proposed only for industrial areas.

[3]   A definition of policies as a 'set of interrelated decisions' (Dye 1972) was adopted to allow broad coverage of policy material, including official policies endorsed by the local government, other documentary evidence such as minutes of local government meetings and material related to the proposed redevelopment, including project briefs and design proposals.

[4]   Quotes from in-depth interviews are coded with the first letter from the name of the redevelopment site, the number of the interview completed, and the page number of the interview transcript. For example, (D3:33) refers to the Depot site interviews (Greeves Street), interview number 3, page 33 of the interview transcript.

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